

Wonhyo: Coming to the West —Yet No One Recognizes Him

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Wonhyo can be viewed from two perspectives: 1—the visible appearance, or momjit, of his words and 2—the deeper essence, or mom, which reflects his message. These words, mom and momjit, reflect an ancient East Asian paradigm which refers to the nonduality of the body or essence (mom) and its functions or operations (momjit). These terms have often been translated in the West as “essence” and “function.” It is vital that the reader interpret Wonhyo’s writing from this deeper perspective. In order to do so, the reader himself must change, from being a person of momjit to one of mom.

This paper examines the first paragraph of the first chapter of Wonhyo’s noted Commentary on the Vajrasamādhi Sūtra. The chapter itself is entitled “A Statement of Its Main Idea.” Here Wonhyo discusses the “one mind” by means of a series of negations and affirmations. I have argued that his affirmations are essentially negations of his previous negations, making the point that he is basically negating himself. This is a crucial requirement for any religious practitioner. Everything must be negated, including the practitioner.

Wonhyo concludes this paragraph by saying “... though negating nothing, there is nothing not negated” I have examined this phrase, arguing that it reflects a nature-oriented, Taoist perspective, rather than a Buddhist view which should represent the position of the practitioner. I would prefer to re-translate

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the phrase by stating “... negation is negated” In my view, this more accurately reflects the Buddhist position, in which there is no possibility of affirmation whatsoever. Thus even negation itself is negated.

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Korean Taoism, Mom / Momjit, One Mind, Wonhyo.

We can truthfully say that Wonhyo (617-686) has now arrived in the West. Even within my own narrow field of experience, I have witnessed this truth and assisted in its manifestation. I founded the International Association for Wonhyo Studies both at Stony Brook University here in the United States and at Dongguk University in Korea over ten years ago. I have translated Wonhyo’s noted *Commentaries on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith* (Wonhyo 1979a: HPC.1.733-789), using them not only as texts for my students at various times but also at the International Wonhyo Conference on two separate occasions. This is evidence just within my own life of Wonhyo’s arrival on Western soil and in Western minds.

However, I feel that it is equally true that people have yet to recognize this great seventh-century Korean Buddhist thinker. How am I able to make this statement? It is surely understandable that Westerners would have difficulty in comprehending him. But what is the basis for my statement?

To make an analogy, let us look at the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament of the Christian Bible—specifically, at chapter 24, verses 12-32 (*The NIV Study Bible*: 1586).

These verses relate a story which may be entitled “Jesus on the Way to Emmaus.” In this story, two men who had witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion in Jerusalem were walking back to their hometown of Emmaus and discussing various matters which related to it. They had heard about the visit of Jesus’ mother Mary and Mary Magdalene to the tomb and their shock at not finding his body there. The two men were questioning each other: Did this really mean that Jesus had been resurrected? Suddenly someone appeared out of

nowhere and joined them, asking them what they were talking about. This person was Jesus, but they did not recognize him and merely showed surprise that he had not heard the news.

When the group arrived at Emmaus, the two men invited Jesus to have dinner with them. He accepted and shared some bread with them, making an offering of prayer to God. It was at that point that they recognized who he was. However, as soon as they recognized him, he disappeared.

How should we interpret this story? Firstly, how is it that these two men failed to recognize Jesus? Secondly, what is the implication of Jesus' sudden disappearance upon being recognized?

Many Biblical commentators have attempted to answer these questions by merely saying that it was God's will that these events happened as they did. In other words, the commentators felt that for reasons unknown to the men, God deliberately prevented them from recognizing Jesus. Yet if we view the matter from a human perspective, we can acknowledge that a great person such as Jesus will inevitably possess numerous unknown qualities that ordinary people cannot perceive. We, as ordinary sentient beings, are too immersed in, too attached to, our limited understanding of this. We then use that same inferior understanding in our attempt to decipher the words and/or behavior of others—and their true aspects remain hidden from us. With regard to the Korean paradigm of *mom* (body, essence) and *momjit* (body's functions and gestures, phenomena), we can say that because of our attachment to *momjit*, which represents all phenomenal appearances, we cannot perceive or recognize the underlying *mom*, or essence, of the situation, event, or person that we are apprehending (Park, 2007: v-xxvi).

Why did Jesus disappear so suddenly? Can we brush off this event superficially by merely claiming that it must have been God's will? In my view, the two men were too attached to Jesus' *momjit*, the appearance of his body, and failed to recognize his *mom*, the inner essence of his body itself. Jesus himself immediately realized this, and so he removed himself from their sight in order not to prolong or further encourage their error.

In returning to our discussion of Wonhyo, we may apply a similar

understanding. We must take care that we do not become attached to the numerous documents and texts which he wrote. These writings, we must remember, are merely a fingertip which point to the moon, to use a famous Buddhist metaphor. They are not, and never will be, the moon itself. There are many ways in which we may study Wonhyo's teachings: we can use a philological, historical, philosophical, or comparative approach. Yet no matter what perspective we operate from, we are still remaining within the realm of *momjit*, of phenomenal appearance. This cannot be avoided, as it represents our limitations as human beings. Yet if we want to understand Wonhyo correctly, we must keep in mind that our goal is to see the moon; we must always search for the essence of his thought which underlies the words. If we hastily conclude from our reading: "Oh, I understand. This is what Wonhyo thought," then we are in danger of making a mistake. We may easily fail to recognize Wonhyo, just as the two men in the Christian Biblical story failed to recognize Jesus.

Keeping this in mind, I would now like to examine an excerpt from Wonhyo's *Commentary on the Vajrasamādhi Sūtra* (Wonhyo 1979b: HPC.1.604-677). I would specifically like to focus on the very first paragraph of Part I, entitled "A Statement of Its Main Idea." The following is Robert Buswell's translation of this paragraph as it appears in Buswell's newly published book entitled *Cultivating Original Enlightenment: Wonhyo's Exposition of the Vajrasamādhi Sūtra* (Buswell 2007). Please note that in the third to last sentence, beginning with the word "Accordingly" I have preferred to use the terms "negating" and "negated" as a replacement for Buswell's "refuting" and "refuted." Similarly, where Buswell says "establishing" and "established" I have preferred to use the terms "affirming" and "affirmed."

A Statement of Its Main Idea

Now, the fountainhead of the one mind (*ekacitta*), which is distinct from existence (*bhava*) and nonexistence (*abhava*), is independently pure. The sea of the three voidnesses (*trayaḥ sunyataḥ*), which subsumes absolute (*paramārtha*) and conventional (*samvṛti*), is

profoundly calm. Profoundly calm, it subsumes dualities and yet is not unitary. Independently pure, it is far from the extremes and yet is not located at the middle. Because it is not located at the middle and yet is far from the extremes, dharmas that are nonexistent do not linger in nonexistence and characteristics (*lakṣana*) that are not-nonexistent do not linger in existence. Because it is not unitary and yet subsumes dualities, those phenomena that are not absolute need not be conventional and those principles that are not conventional need not be absolute. Because it subsumes dualities and yet is not unitary, there are none of its absolute or conventional qualities that are not established and none of its tainted or pure characteristics that are not furnished therein. Because it is far from the extremes and yet is not located at the middle, there are none of the existent or nonexistent dharmas that are inactive and none of its affirmative or negative (*śibi*) concepts with which it is not equipped. Accordingly, though refuting nothing, there is nothing not refuted and, though establishing nothing, there is nothing not established. This alone can be called the ultimate principle that is free from principles and the great suchness that is not-such. This is said to be the main idea of this sutra (Buswell 2007: 47-48; Eun 2000: 19-20).

In this paragraph he discusses what he calls the “fountainhead of the one mind” in various ways. He makes twelve distinct statements concerning this one mind, which he correspondingly calls the “sea of the three voidnesses.” Let us take a look at these statements and observe their significance for our discussion here.

The most crucial point that can be made about these statements is that the first eight represent various types of negations, whereas the final four are seemingly affirmations. More will be said about this later, but for now let’s briefly examine these statements with regard to this observation.

The following shows the negations mentioned in the first eight statements:

1. Negation of existence and nonexistence
2. Negation of absolute and conventional
3. Negation of duality and oneness
4. Negation of extremities and the middle

5. Negation of nonexistence (of nonexistent dharmas)
6. Negation of existence (of not-nonexistent characteristics)
7. Negation of conventionality (of non-absolute phenomena)
8. Negation of absoluteness (of non-conventional principles)

At this point, beginning with the ninth statement and continuing through to the twelfth, Wonhyo seems to reverse his position; instead of negating things, he now affirms them. Let's look at these statements:

9. Affirmation (i.e., “none ... not affirmed”) of absolute and conventional qualities

10. Affirmation (i.e., “none ... not furnished therein”) of tainted and pure characteristics

11. Affirmation (i.e., “none ... inactive”) of existent and nonexistent dharmas

12. Affirmation (i.e., “none ... not equipped”) of affirmative and negative concepts

Finally, after his declaration of these twelve statements regarding the one mind, or voidness, Wonhyo comes to a momentous conclusion. He says succinctly: “Accordingly, though negating nothing, there is nothing not negated and, though affirming nothing, there is nothing not affirmed.” Let us focus our attention on the first part of this statement, specifically the phrase “negating nothing.” What is meant by this? There are two possible answers. The first is that, as suggested earlier, Wonhyo is merely making an affirmation; that is, he is accepting and embracing all the various phenomena and characteristics of the secular world. Yet this interpretation is problematic because it clearly contradicts the negations which were asserted in the previous eight statements. Therefore, I don't believe that this is the correct answer to the question. In my view, in the last four statements, rather than making affirmations, Wonhyo is really making additional negations. In essence, he is negating his previous negations, and thus in a sense he is negating himself.

In the Western world, religious people negate or deny anything and everything that goes against the will of God. Does this mean, however, that after they negate everything, they themselves stand alone as being affirmed? On the contrary—to meet God’s will, they too must be negated. Once a religious practitioner adopts the position of self-negation, then and only then can he follow and fulfill the will of God.

Turning back to Wonhyo, in his first eight statements he negates everything that is other than himself. Finally, in the last four statements he negates what he already negated; thus, he is really negating negation itself. Let us look a bit more closely at this idea, re-reading Wonhyo’s final statement: “Accordingly, though negating nothing, there is nothing not negated and, though affirming nothing, there is nothing not affirmed.” Every translation I have seen interprets this passage in this way. However, in my opinion, to do so represents a Taoist, rather than a Buddhist, perspective. As Wonhyo himself was a noted Buddhist, and not a Taoist, thinker, I feel that this type of translation misleads the reader as to Wonhyo’s intended message.

What is my basis for making such a claim? One of the most fundamental tenets of Taoist thought is the principle of *wu-wei* (無爲), which may be translated as “no action” or “non-activity.” This concept may be seen as a metaphor for nature itself (Chinese: 自然 *tzu-ran*). We should note here that the Eastern understanding of nature differs quite radically from that of the Western world. In the West, nature is viewed as an objective realm; man is free to enjoy it or destroy it according to his will, for it is seen to exist purely as an object, outside himself. For Easterners, however, nature encompasses everything, including man, for it is *mom* itself. Lao-tzu, considered by many to be the “father” of Taoism, was constantly drawing people’s attention to nature. His message was essentially that it does nothing, yet there is nothing it does not do. This is also the meaning of *wu-wei*. It is not meant to reflect a state of immobility, in which no movement whatsoever occurs, but rather points to a “doing without doing.”

When Buddhist practitioners arrived in China from India, they made use of this term *wu-wei* as a means of helping the Chinese people to better

understand the meaning of the Buddhist term “enlightenment.” In our contemporary world, the concept of *wu-wei* as been adopted unquestioningly by many Buddhists who feel that it is an essential aspect of Buddhist thought. Yet in doing so, they are remaining in ignorance of the intention of the Buddha’s teachings, which was to point to the truth of human suffering and how it may be eliminated. I will elaborate on this in just a minute, but for now, let us return to the passage which I previously cited and investigate its meaning. When Wonhyo writes, “nothing is negated” what is he saying? The words used here reflect a state in which no action of negation exists. Similarly, the words “nothing is affirmed” suggest that no affirmation is present either. The message as it appears here, then, is two-fold: nothing is denied yet nothing is affirmed. This interpretation, as I stated above, corresponds quite closely with the Taoist view of nature; it is an ontological perspective, denoting the quality of nature itself. I am critical of this interpretation, as I feel that the Buddha’s message was a different one. I also believe that Wonhyo himself, a committed follower of Buddhist teachings, never intended to convey the Taoist message of *wu-wei*. Let us now examine this issue further.

First of all, it is my belief that the Buddha’s teaching cannot be accurately understood without an acknowledgement of the deep significance of his radical act of leaving home. This act represented an expression of his desire for wisdom, or a higher level of consciousness, and thus we may say that it reflected an upward spiritual direction. Subsequently, after he attained enlightenment, his direction moved downward; he returned back to the secular world and spread his message to others. Without the initial thrust, represented by his act of leaving home, he would not have been able to begin his upward quest. We might note here that it may be entirely possible to “leave home” without ever crossing your doorstep. What is of crucial importance is what the act of leaving home implies, which is moving away, either literally or symbolically, from one’s old, familiar, cherished perceptions about himself and his life. For the Buddha, this moving away from the familiar was a radical physical experience in which he left both home and family, wandering from

place to place for six years while studying with a number of teachers, seeking answers to his questions concerning the truth of existence. In this way he was learning to negate, step by step, all of his previous conceptions about himself and his life. Later he was able to assert the value of what he had learned from this negation process, but the initial experience of complete negation, which was a type of renunciation, was essential.

Now let us return to the passage in the commentary which we have been discussing. As I said before, I do not feel that the words “nothing is negated” accurately reflect the Buddha’s experience. These words, stated thus, represent an affirmation, for if nothing is negated then everything is affirmed. Yet the Buddha’s experience, as we have seen, and in his initial teaching as well, began in just the opposite direction: they were a negation. In addition, we need to note that for any teaching to be labeled Buddhist, it must begin with the human element, with man’s unavoidable condition of suffering, his basic sense of dissatisfaction with life. It does not begin, as Taoist teachings do, with an ontological statement about the nature of reality in which “nothing is negated.” Rather, the first of the Buddha’s discourses to his disciplines following his enlightenment experience delineate what are called the Four Noble Truths, and the first of these truths states that life, all life, is inevitably accompanied by the experience of suffering. This in itself may be seen as a type of negation, as it reflects a negative perspective of life. This understanding of our own dissatisfaction is crucial if we are ever to attain awakening, for how can we arrive at the affirmative experience of enlightenment unless we first realize its inherent negative aspect?

Now I would like to briefly discuss my reasons for feeling that Wonhyo himself would not have approved of the Taoist interpretation of this passage which is in such widespread existence today. We have just investigated the first paragraph of Part One of his *Commentary on the Vajrasamādhi Sūtra*, in which he clearly depicts the nature of one mind and its corresponding “sea of triple emptiness.” He describes them first as a negation, and then as an affirmation. (Although I earlier discussed the latter as a negation of his previous negation, it may easily be seen initially as a simple affirmation.)

Clearly then, Wonhyo sees the importance of a sequential process from the negative to the positive. Indeed, he supports this position by immediately following this particular discussion with the word “hence.” In this way, I feel, he is putting his stamp of approval on my argument here, thus corroborating my assertion concerning his intent.

At this point I would like to offer what I feel is a more accurate interpretation of the passage, one which more closely reflects Wonhyo’s intended message. The classical Chinese words for this phrase are: *wu po erh wu pu po* (無破而無不破) or *mu p’a i mu bul p’a* in Korean. It is the word *wu* here that is in question; its traditional translation has been rendered as “nothing.” However, I see this first *wu* as representing a strong, dynamic action, the act of negation itself. Thus, instead of reading “negating nothing” I believe the passage should read “negating negation.” In my opinion, it is a mistake to interpret this phrase as meaning that no negation occurs. Rather, *wu* is aggressive and we are led to realize that all negation is negated. If we read the phrase in this way, there can be no mistake concerning its negative meaning. Not able to be turned into an affirmation, it remains an utter negation. Similarly, in the first part of the second phrase, which has been traditionally translated as “affirming nothing,” I would like to change it to “negating affirmation.” Here again, as a result of this change, the meaning of the phrase is altered to represent a negation, whereas its original translation reflects just the opposite, an affirmation. Thus, my altered translation of the entire passage reads as follows:

While negating negation, there is nothing not negated.

While negating affirmation, there is nothing not affirmed.

As you can see, I have not altered the second half of either sentence. I see no need to change these phrases, as they aptly reflect the condition in which affirmation is now permitted and endorsed. With the changes I have installed in the first half of each sentence, however, the sequence from negation to affirmation has been correctly delineated. With this new translation, I feel confident that the Buddha’s teachings have been accurately conveyed.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese)

Lao-tzu (C) 老子

One mind 一心

Tzu-ran (C) 自然

Wonhyo (K) 元曉

Wu po erh wu pu po (C), Mu p'a i mu bul p'a (K) 無破而無不破

Wu-wei (C) 無爲

Abbreviation

HPC *Han'guk pulgyo chunseo* (韓國佛教全書: *The Collected Texts of Korean Buddhism*), Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1984.

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